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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 2927
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0747
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0623
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 1200
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1858
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001182

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SUBJECT: AMERICAN FRIENDS OF THE TURKMEN PROMOTE COOPERATION

Classified By: CHARGE RICHARD E. HOAGLAND FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The California-based Christian evangelical group "Friends of the Turkmen" has spent a dozen years slowly building relations with Turkmenistan government officials. Although they have contacts with small Protestant congregations in the country, their focus is more on education and health cooperation rather than strictly religion. The group is routinely invited for Turkmenistan Independence Day and has organized Turkmenistan-themed celebrations in the U.S., sometimes at the behest of high-ranking Turkmenistan officials. During their most recent trip, the group met with officials from six ministries and pitched a cooperative relationship with SUNY-Buffalo where one of the group teaches engineering. One lesson from the group is that to build cooperative relations with the Turkmen, it often takes lots of patience and spade work. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) On October 24, the official newspaper "Neutral Turkmenistan" carried on the front page a poster, produced by a group known as the American Friends of the Turkmen, specially for President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov's recent trip to New York for the UN General Assembly. Members of this evangelical Christian group, most of whom reside in California, traveled to Turkmenistan for the October 27 Independence Day festivities and were interviewed during coverage of a concert held the on the eve of the national day. On October 31, EmbOff met with the Friends of the Turkmen (FOT) group who discussed their long association with government officials and goals for cooperation.

WHO ARE THE FRIENDS OF THE TURKMEN

13. (C) The group leader said he founded the Friends of the Turkmen because of his interest in the country and a desire to promote cooperation. He first came to Turkmenistan in 1995 with a school basketball team he coached. During this visit, he met Turkmen Ambassador to the United States Mered Orazov, who was then Rector of Turkmen State University, and Turkmen State's basketball coach. During subsequent annual visits, the FOT founder visited Orazov in his home and the two men traveled to other provinces together. After Orazov

left his post at the university and was posted to Washington, he traveled to California to see his American friend. In 2004 Orazov suggested that his friend write a letter to former President Niyazov for his birthday. The FOT leader said the letter he sent quoted the "Ruhnama," Niyazov's "book of the soul," and Bible verses. Niyazov, supposedly, was so taken by the letter, he invited the Friends of the Turkmen group to visit Turkmenistan for Independence Day that year. In 2005, Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov asked the Friends of the Turkmen to organize Turkmenistan Independence Day celebrations in California (which they did in San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco). They have also held Turkmenistan-themed gatherings at other times and in various places on the West Coast.

HIGH-LEVEL MEETINGS

¶4. (C) The group that traveled this year to Turkmenistan includes a physician, a civil engineering professor from SUNY-Buffalo, a seismologist-structural engineer, and acity official from Glendale, California. The group met with Foreign Minister Meredov, and deputy ministers from the Ministries of Health, Economics and Finance, Education, State Tourism and Sports, and Culture and Broadcasting. At each meeting, the group expressed a desire to expand cooperation, especially in the areas of healthcare and education. The physician offered to return and present seminars. The seismologist wanted to talk to Turkmen counterparts about earthquake-proofing buildings. The SUNY professor wanted to talk about exchanges with his university, particularly in various engineering fields (civil, structural, environmental, hazardous waste, construction, and earthquake engineering).

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He outlined SUNY's distance-learning program which offers a Masters Degree in civil engineering without once needing to set foot on the SUNY/B campus. In addition, the group hopes to sponsor Turkmen students to study at SUNY. (COMMENT: The group would probably have to raise money specifically for that purpose since its budget is minuscule, and most likely would only be able to sponsor a very limited number of students. END COMMENT.) According to the group, the Ministry of Education was so taken by its proposals that there was a follow-up meeting. At the other ministries, officials asked for detailed, concrete proposals for them to consider. FOT members said they were warmly received in all meetings.

THE RELIGIOUS CONNECTION

¶5. (C) EmbOff asked what part the group's religious affiliation played in what they are trying to accomplish. FOT members responded they have always been up front with Turkmen officials about their orientation. They knew of groups that have tried to be surreptitious, and once discovered, the relationship was severed. They maintain contacts with small Turkmenistani evangelical groups. However, FOT does not try to import Bibles or other religious material. Their goal is to promote friendship by increased contact and cooperation with officials. They emphasize commonalties between themselves and the Turkmen, such as strong family values. Prior to Niyazov's death, group members studied the "Ruhnama" to use that as a point of departure for discussions with officials. The seismologist said he can quote from it extensively. The group unanimously called the book "ridiculous," and hoped it would fade away. They were pleased about signs that there is increasing official emphasis on Turkmen history and culture.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: It is interesting to learn the Turkmenistan government is open to cooperation with private Americans and the fact that the group is faith-based is not an impediment. This group has learned that it takes many years to build relations with the Turkmen. The key to building cooperative relations are patience and lots of spade work. It also helps to have detailed, concrete proposals. END COMMENT.

